

Designing and Carrying Out Conscientious Research With Marginalized Groups

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Marginalized groups and communities frequently have unique concerns and needs when they consider participating in research. They might have had prior experience with researchers that ended poorly, heard of others having negative experiences, or be wary of individuals in positions of power (and rightly so). For example, they might be concerned that participating in research might inadvertently expose them to harm, or that researchers might misrepresent their unique experiences. While no one would disagree that researchers should consider these issues, during a recent study they presented themselves in unexpected ways, particularly when thinking about recruitment and analysis.

My collaborators and I have been working with transgender and non-binary people who use social media to understand their experiences with coming to their identity and coming out to their social networks online. Through the course of this study, we experienced several successes and challenges that are worth sharing with the community. These challenges and corresponding successes occurred during the early stages of recruiting participants, where we struggled with getting potential participants to respond to our recruitment, and during the analysis of the data from interviewing with our participants, where we struggled with analyzing the stories we heard in a way that was true to our participants.

During recruitment, we used common strategies for qualitative work — creating a study-specific email, a flyer that could be shared both physically and digitally with information about the study, and asking potential participants to email us. Initially, this form of recruiting was effective; we scheduled three interviews within the first day of the recruitment being shared. However, after those initial responses, the response dropped dramatically. In reaction to the lack of response, we adopted a series of suggestions from our third participant about how we could improve our recruitment. These suggestions included:

- Wording changes in the recruitment itself to be more inclusive.
- Using a survey/form for potential participants to indicate interest instead of having them email us.
- Creating concrete documentation to demonstrate the research team's qualifications for doing this sort of research (for us, we did this on our lab website, which is hosted on our institution's servers).

The participant felt that these changes would lend the research more credibility and make it more inclusive to potential participants who might see the recruitment call. In particular, they felt that the form offered potential participants an easier way of contacting our team because it made the workflow of indicating interest in participating simpler.

By adopting these suggestions, our response rate picked up dramatically, and we were able to hit our target number of participants. Additionally, participants noted that they liked the set-up of using a form to indicate interest, as it took some pressure off them in initiating contact with

researchers, putting the onus on us to follow-up with them. They also noted that positioning information about the research on an official site lent the recruitment and research legitimacy that made them feel more comfortable about indicating interest via the form.

Inspired by our participants' suggestions and comments about the recruitment, we thought very carefully about how to report on and discuss the findings that came from the interviews we conducted with our participants. While in our study we were interested in taking an ecological view of social media from the outset (adopted from the work of scholars such as Zhao et al., 2016 and DeVito et al., 2018), we struggled with interpreting the experiences of our participants. It felt inappropriate to provide analysis and discussion without being able to acknowledge their positionality and lived experiences. We also wanted to avoid generalizing the experience of a few participants to the entire participant group or worse the entire community.

To better interpret the stories our participants told us about their coming outs online, we turned to literature and scholarly work that directly addressed the experiences of transgender and non-binary people in the offline world — the discipline of transgender theory. Using the conceptual lens provided by scholars from transgender theory allowed us to interpret our participants' experiences in a way that felt authentic and simultaneously allowed us to translate the theory from offline to online AND suggest how it might be more widely adopted in HCI research. As a way of ensuring that our analytical approach was conscientious and in-line with our participants' experiences, we will also take the additional step of sharing the findings and discussion section with our participants before submission, and again carefully consider their feedback as we prepare the final manuscript. Sharing findings and discussion in this way is a common step in community-engaged or action research (Hayes, 2011), but is particularly important in marginalized communities like the transgender and/or non-binary community because each individual has a vastly different experience, and as a result, has vastly different needs. Sharing the findings and discussion with our participants allows them to become co-researchers alongside us, and ultimately gives them the agency to affect what is written about them, their experiences and their communities.

From the experiences we had in recruiting participants and interpreting the experiences they told us of, I suggest that there are better ways to recruit potential participants from marginalized groups (particularly when some of the researchers are not part of that community) and that researchers should turn to scholars from those communities to find conceptual and theoretical frames that might be relevant to their participants' experiences. I believe our experiences in this particular research endeavor might be of interest to the larger community of researchers who work with and study marginalized groups, and I am excited at the opportunity to join the community and share our team's experiences, while also having the chance to learn from others' experiences in investigating and designing for marginalized groups to improve my work.

References

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